



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

9-23-2011

[untitled]

Yueran Zhang

Panel: Writer Rules: Share What You Go By

Rights

Copyright © 2011 Yueran Zhang

Recommended Citation

Zhang, Yueran, "[untitled]" (2011). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 840.
https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/840

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#). For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

ZHANG Yueran

When I chose the topic “Writer Rules,” a friend suggested that I talk about the constraints of the political environment in China. I considered this, but there are already too many Chinese writers who talk about politics when they are meant to be talking about literature. Instead, I would like to share with you one thing about traditional Chinese culture: the only rule is that of Nature. Only when human desire comes together with the rule of Nature can we attain the highest pitch of creativity.

Let’s look at rocks as an example of the basic difference between Chinese and Western art. From the ancient Greeks onwards, sculpture has held an important place in the Western world. The process of sculpting human likenesses out of rock can be seen as the act of liberating life from stone, but is also a means of controlling nature. Whereas in China, you often see rocks placed in gardens, courtyards, parks and living rooms – in their natural state. The Chinese do not feel the need to excavate life from these rocks. Rocks have life of their own.

In the Bible, Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt – a kind of rock – when she looked back at the city of Sodom. This is seen as a severe punishment, implying the end of her life. But if someone had brought this pillar of salt to China, Lot’s wife might have been saved. In China, being turned into a rock is not necessarily a bad thing, as rocks have eternal life. To quote ‘yunlin shipu’ “The Book of Yunlin Rocks”: “A rock contains a thousand years of beauty, not ‘one hundred years of solitude.’”

Two of the most famous characters in classic Chinese literature come from rocks. The monkey god, Sun Wukong, in the sixteenth-century novel, “Journey to the West,” burst into the world from a rock. Jia Baoyu, the main character in the great eighteenth-century work “Dream of the Red Chamber,” was transformed from a rock left over after the creation of the heavens. Chinese writers and poets have always been enamoured of rocks: whenever the eleventh century artist Mi Fu came across a particularly attractive rock, he would fall to his knees – as in a marriage proposal.

I have some friends who collect rocks as a hobby. They can tell how old a rock is. Do rocks have ages? Aren’t they all several hundred million years old? Well, yes. But we actually refer to their cultural age, meaning when each rock was first given value, whether in the sixteenth or eighteenth century. Each generation forms its own appraisal of these rocks.

Everybody knows the story of Sisyphus rolling a boulder up a hill. There is another version of this story in China: a man decides to move a mountain that blocks the path in front of his house. He takes away a single stone every day. Unlike the futility of the Greek story, this man’s persistence moves the God of Heaven, who causes the mountain to vanish. This is a typical Chinese story: one of established rules being thrown into disorder by the unexpected. Back home, whenever you get in line, someone always cuts in front of you. I wonder whether the Chinese tendency to break rules, is the reason that historically, Chinese artists have had so few of them.

Since the eighth century, the Buddhist idea of zen – the “Wisdom of Emptiness” – has had great influence on Chinese art and literature. An old Chinese proverb says, “文章本天成，妙手偶得之,” “The words are already there; the lucky sometimes stumble upon them.” The height of Chinese art is to pursue nothing, and unexpectedly find something. Human reason

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 23, 2011:

Kevin Bloom (S. Africa), Fabienne Kanor (France), Kgebetli Moele (S. Africa),

Usha K.R. (India), Moshe Sakal (Israel), Marvin Victor (Haiti), and Zhang Yueran (China)

For electronic texts please visit www.iwp.uiowa.edu

cannot explain the world. In Chinese culture, something made with skill, by the rules, is what we call “能品,” “an ability object” – a matter of technique. But there is a higher level, called “神品,” “a god object,” which means that the gods work through you, to create art.

My words may not seem to have very much to do with writing, and to be honest, I can't say how these ideas have appeared in my own writing, or how I could use them. But I believe they are of use. Many Chinese writers today pay too much attention to the idea of writers' rules. These may not be actual rules, but restrictions they choose to place on themselves and their work. Not every rock is suitable for carving into a statue. For some, this will liberate the life within them. For others, it may instead destroy the life they already have.

It will take a long time to escape these rules, which writers have felt the need to create because China's own culture is broken. First, we will have to complete our recovery. This recovery will not be helped by the booming Chinese economy, nor hindered by government action. This recovery will happen at its own pace – following the rules of nature.

Translated from the Chinese by Su Hongjun and Jeremy Tiang